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ABSTRACT

A popular image today is that students are "consumers" and teachers are "producers" and "sellers" of education. Many in academia claim that economic metaphors distort and corrupt the true nature of education and they offer a variety of alternative images of the relationships between teachers and students: traveler/guide, worker/boss, artistic co-creators, etc. Educators seem to resist the new wave of economic imagery as a result of fear and the belief that reconceiving education as a fundamental economic exchange is a misunderstanding of education. But the changes in education toward an economic model have been occurring for some time. Grading, for example, was an invention in the early industrial period that linked competition for employment and status to education. The role of grading highlights two forms of power in education: empowerment, or the acquisition of abilities to ascertain and accomplish one's goals, and authority, either in the "natural authority" of a knowledgeable person or authority based on power over another person. Grades are related to the "power-over" aspect of authority. However, their presence and the presence of other "power-over" relationships reduce education by leading to the undervaluing of empowerment. Education is an exchange, but one that should be thought of more in terms of giving a gift than buying and selling. True teachers remain parts of the beings of students, and students continuously give new life and light to teachers. The gifting metaphor demonstrates an alternative economic image of education that focuses on dynamics, the uncertainties, and most importantly, the relationships of selves involved in teaching and learning. Contains nine endnotes. (TGI)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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Education Is a Gift, Not a Commodity

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Educators are loathe to admit that in education, as in entertainment, politics, fashion and advertising, images matter. Nevertheless, we in higher education, as well as our counterparts in "lower" education, are quite susceptible to fads, to new (or, as is often the case, recycled) images and metaphors, most especially to those about the nature of our work. Rather than deny or be embarrassed by the extraordinary power of images in thinking about education, I believe we need to see that it is natural for educators to be sensitive to and rely upon images of what we are and do. For just as the hucksters of our culture relentlessly pound their audiences with ever-new images of whom we are or what we might become if only we would purchase their products, educators, too, are in a business wherein images of **self** are fundamental.

Witness the current push for **accountability** in education. How shall we conceive of our responsibilities toward our students and their parents? A popular image today is that they are "consumers" and we are "producers" and "sellers" of education. Many in academia say that economic metaphors distort and corrupt the true nature of education, and they offer a variety of alternative images for the relationships between teachers and learners: traveler/guide, worker/boss, parent/child, artistic co-creators, lovers, therapist/client, etc. Each image bears some insights, often profoundly important ones, and has helped to shape and reflect the contours of education in a given context. If we explore the subtexts of the current debate about accountability we will find deep and abiding images of our selves and those of our students. We cannot do without images in this process, for the self takes its shape on the wings of its images: we are, in

elemental ways, what we imagine ourselves to be; and like it or not, educators are in the business of fostering selves. Moreover, our situation is doubly complicated, for the images we have of ourselves and of our students profoundly affect the selves that emerge from our work.

Education is a business. A **big** business. Most parents and students have shopped hard for the right educational fit, and they pay, often great sums, for what seems like a commodity--education. Why shouldn't these "consumers" expect, and receive, quality and accountability? The logic of this position seems inescapable, and in the face of the powerful image of student as consumer administrators, boards of directors, and many teachers as well, have sought parallel images of accountability: Total Quality Management, cost/benefit accounting, downsizing, Continuous Quality Improvement, academic assessment, outcomes based education. In an age of pervasive economic thinking, why should education not be held to the same standards, including using the same language and images, as almost all other dimensions of our lives?

One reason why economic imagery has become more acceptable to educators is because of its ubiquity. If virtually all institutions, practices, and relationships are framed in economic terms, then it seems "natural" to think of what we in education do in the same way. Furthermore, increasingly the atmosphere in which the people who run the incredibly complex institutions schools have become is one where business practices and thinking are required. The educations of school administrators are heavily oriented to running a business, their everyday reading is more likely to be from a business management than an "academic" journal, the language that fills their

conversations and meetings is bathed in business imagery, and we expect them to talk the language of business people so that they might form lucrative alliances with them. Finally, if we in education increasingly speak the language of economics and business, why should we not expect our students and their parents to view their educational "investments" in the same way?

If the result of this powerful change in our sense of what education is about is students coming to class eager to learn, or faculty working harder to meet student demands for higher quality instruction, or reducing the number of excess administrators or burned out teachers, the producer/consumer imagery could be a very good thing. I find, e.g., fewer students today, as compared to two decades ago, who are pleased when classes are canceled, and while the increased seriousness of students of the 90s probably is caused mainly by economic hard times, the desire for a "payoff" from their "investment" does render them more willing to learn ("anxious to succeed" is perhaps more accurate). The wave of assessment now sweeping through all of education undoubtedly will be painful and probably often will be trivial in its real educational value; nevertheless, if our institutions take more seriously how our graduates fare as a result of having paid us to help them become educated, and if we as individual teachers learn to better assess how well our students are learning, American education at all levels could improve as a result.

Why, then, would educators resist the new wave of economic imagery? Undoubtedly for many **fear** is a factor: fear of new ways of thinking, fear of relinquishing power in the classroom, fear of increased administrative power, fear of losing jobs.[1] While each of these kinds of fears is important, and, I believe, often is well founded, and furthermore each may constitute in itself a

good reason for not adopting the producer/consumer mentality, I want to address a different kind of reason for resisting: many educators believe that to reconceive education as fundamentally an economic exchange is to misunderstand education, and to change in this way the imagery by which we act would be to deform what we should be doing.

The changes in education toward an economic model have been occurring for some time. Grading was an invention of education in the early industrial period, and I want to use grades as an example both to show how an economic exchange model corrupts education and what one better alternative might be.

Before the rise of industrialism and modern mass democracies, most formal education was for the elite few. Pedagogically, an "objective" process such as grades becomes necessary only when teachers do not know their students well and/or have time to evaluate their work in detail. Thus grades were unnecessary before modern societies. Added to this pedagogical motivation, grades were invented during the early Industrial Revolution to link employment to education. Those who succeeded in the competition for grades generally were to be granted privileged access in the greater competitions for status and wealth in society, and in many ways and realms the system of grades has indeed provided the linkage from education to employment and opportunity. Within this complex system grades have had a myriad of effects on education, not the least of which has been to give school learning inordinate power in the shaping of people's senses of themselves and each other. I wish to focus on this one aspect of grading because I believe it gets us to the heart of what is problematic about economic images of education.

Education always has involved teaching skills and information. Furthermore, knowledge always has been power: from the dawn of time the wonders and temptations of power undoubtedly have permeated the learning/teaching process. I believe that the central concern of the critics of economic imagery in education is the belief that viewing education fundamentally as an economic exchange both reduces the wonders of, and succumbs to several temptations of, power in educational relationships.

There are several senses of power,[2] none of which are inherently bad, but each of which can be misused. One form of power in education is **empowerment**, the acquisition of the abilities to ascertain and accomplish one's goals and desires. Such power is the focus and goal, e.g., of critical or liberatory pedagogy a la Paulo Freire and others.[3] I believe most education is empowering for most learners in some ways, but the level of empowerment in much education gets truncated or mostly overridden by other, disempowering, power relations, and the process of empowerment itself is subject to misuse especially if teachers see themselves as **giving** power to students. One reason consumer images of education are so attractive, especially to students and parents, is that such images appear to provide a way to gain empowerment.

A second kind of power found in education is the power of authority. Hannah Arendt[4] long ago distinguished two kinds of authority in education, one based on the **natural authority** of a knowledgeable person, the other based on **power over**. A person or group has power over another person, group or thing when the first person or group gets the second to bend to their desires. Power-over power is the power most ripe for misuse, as it can, and often does, lead to abuses such as sexual harassment or ideological conditioning, and educators

would be naive to suppose, in an era of mandatory schooling and the awesome power of institutionalized education, that we do not wield power over students. Surely not all of this power-over power is bad. Much of the responsibility we have for students, especially younger ones, involves having power over. The question is how to develop and use this power without it turning into harmful **domination**--the unjustifiable or bad control of another. Arendt's distinction helps us sort out good and bad power-over relationships to some extent, but it would also be naive to suppose that "natural authority" could not be abused. Anyone who has taught realizes the incredible temptations to turn one's natural authority into some form of domination.

These distinctions are not drawn finely enough, however. Empowerment has two conceptually distinct but integrally related dimensions: **power toward**, the ability to affect one's world, and **power within**, strengths of character, of self. Seen from the viewpoint of the learner, empowerment is not something done **for** the student, but rather is a kind of joint project, which Karen Warren calls **power with**. Just what this mode of empowerment looks like depends on the context, but the power with sense of power emphasizes the cooperative efforts of teacher and learner, and therefore only part of a teacher's job is to be a natural authority: we have all known extremely knowledgeable people who were very poor teachers.

Both aspects of empowerment are especially endangered when power-over relationships dominate in education. Grades are a form of power-over relationship both in students' relationships with teachers and the institutions they represent, and in students' competitive relationships with each other. Grades do carry messages, they have a cognitive content, and educators are not wrong to

emphasize the need to communicate with each other and the world outside of schools what and how well students are learning. However, it is a monumental oversight to overlook the **performative** meanings of grades: grades sort people in many ways, outside as well as inside the classroom; they shape self images with effects far beyond school doors; they profoundly affect all sorts of relationships in and out of schools; and they give education great power in determining who "succeeds" in life, be it socially, economically, psychologically, or spiritually. Grades are a major power-over tool.

The presence of grades and other power-over relationships in education **reduce** education in several ways. First, they tend to make us ignore or undervalue other forms of power, most especially empowerment. In a power-over learning atmosphere knowledge becomes a tool for power over which students wish to acquire so that they, too, might have power over. Education becomes "merely instrumental," and the intrinsic values of learning are diminished. Although the attempt by students and parents to gain some power, represented by the **power-against** power move of acting as consumers calling the producers of education to task, has the potential to make educators more responsive and responsible, much that is truly important in education is sidetracked or lost as a result. For while using consumer images in this way can win some ground for students, it "buys into" the very notions of education as power over that prevail in the institutions and practices they want to change. Economic images such as student as consumer do not threaten the power-over power of the educational establishment because they speak the same language and carry the same values as the grading system--grades, and the knowledge they symbolize, are a medium of exchange.

Again, we are brought to our basic question: what is problematic about such economic imagery in education? Complaints about the lost intrinsic values of education or the lack of true empowerment come down to the crucial factor missing from the power-over image of education as exchange--the self. Arendt had it right in her insistence that academic goods are embodied in persons, and there is no doubt that much of good learning happens in encounters with "natural authorities." However, her model of education was mainly a transmission model wherein the mind of the student is opened to receive the wisdom of the great mind. Warren's fifth kind of power relation, **power with**, suggests a different image for education. In power-with relationships, the parties need not be equal in status, knowledge, age, etc., but their relationship must be focused on the enhancement of their mutually evolving selves. Education, seen from this vantage point, is a conversation wherein the key emergent property is the self.[5]

Too often proponents of educating the person, or character education, de-emphasize skills and knowledge, but this is to misunderstand the self. Selves emerge and take shape in and through relationships, and selves are made up of their ideas, values, beliefs, skills, bodies and relationships. In his recent books on the soul,[6] Thomas Moore insists that while the language of the soul is poetic rather than empirical, the soul lives in concrete, everyday activities such as doing chores, tending to children, work, making love, and dreaming. In like manner, education of the self includes skills and knowledge, but it is more. When employers say they want to hire graduates who not **only** have a set of

skills, they are pointing to the importance, in employment, of **character**, of virtues such as flexibility, mental agility, a strong work ethic, care for detail, the ability to work on a team, and so on. Whether or not they know it, such employers want to hire people who have been empowered.

Obviously there is a great deal more to say about the self and education, some of which I will take up shortly, but the bare skeleton I have provided should suffice to help us comprehend the wisdom in Socrates' seemingly eccentric refusal to take money for teaching: if education is self making, a soulful activity, then to treat education primarily as an economic exchange is profoundly disrespectful, on the order of slavery. Charles Taylor[7] contends that a great insight of modernism has been to show that morality is a cornerstone of the self, that respect for persons both in ourselves and others, as Kant says, is a rock-bottom feature of human being; thus any of our relationships, whether parenting, educating or politicking, must begin with and be based on treating persons as ends in themselves. This deep critique of education as a consumer activity says, then, if education is of selves, to view education as a mere economic exchange is to treat students (and teachers) as mere objects in a commodity transaction. Note that we can reduce our selves (as students or as teachers) as well as others, and therefore it is no more right if students "choose" to treat their selves as mere commodities than if we "force" them to.

While I believe the opponents of the exchange model of education are fundamentally correct in their critique, their case can be overdone. Kant himself says we should not treat others **merely** as means; thus my relationship with you can be functional as long as it recognizes and does not harm our mutual humanity. Furthermore, I believe the call to accountability is a much needed one

in education at all levels, and that power-over relations of domination have been prevalent in non-exchange versions of education. The questions are whether or not the imagery of economic exchange is the best way to call educators and their institutions to account, and precisely what are the best images of education for us to live by?

To say what we should avoid in our educational imagery and practices is not to say what we should choose. Perhaps the central reason finding an adequate image for education is difficult is that educational relationships are unique. All of the metaphors suggested above, from child rearing to artistic creation, indicate this uniqueness precisely because they are metaphors--suggestions of ways in which education is **like** romantic love or giving counsel. Because education happens in so many ways in so many contexts with such a variety of teachers and students, I do not believe there is one correct or preferred image for education. Paradoxically, I think we should have both more **and** less respect for metaphors of education: more because our images not only reflect but shape every aspect of education; less because we can forget that the thing itself, teaching and learning, can never be comprehended adequately by metaphors. At the risk of undermining what I have argued about the dangers of using economic metaphors to comprehend education, I would like to suggest one economic metaphor that I believe can help us comprehend better the special processes of shaping selves we call education. This metaphor, like the others we have mentioned, is an approximation, but I believe it can help to clarify the power relations involved in education.

Selves not only take shape and have their beings in their own images, but they also do so **in relationships**. The emphasis on autonomy in the modern

tradition, while extremely important in helping us comprehend why it is wrong to treat our selves or others merely as commodities in an exchange, largely ignores the constitutive nature of relationships in the life of the self: we **are** our relationships. Teaching, therefore, should not only respect the uniqueness and holiness of the individual, but it should also value the relationships of each person including those in the classroom. Education seen basically as an economic exchange, or in its cognate practices such as grading, reduces the relationships involved to a singular, and what should be a minor, dimension. Perhaps Socrates was extreme in his refusal to accept pay for his teaching, but he understood well how overemphasis on economic exchange could sour educational relationships.

Lewis Hyde and others[8] have suggested that economic activity in most pre-capitalistic societies was more like giving gifts than like buying and selling. In a gifting economy, when I give you a gift you do not deserve it, and unlike in an exchange economy, an **imbalance** is created: you can never simply pay me back. The value of the gift rests ultimately on how close to my self and to yours the gift is, not on its market value. And in contrast to an exchange economy where ever more goods must be produced and sold, if a gifting economy is to be healthy "the gift must move," the relationships formed through gifting must be ever remade.

I believe education should be thought of as more like gifting than buying and selling. Students are more like receivers and givers of gifts than they are consumers of products. Yes, they do acquire some things--knowledge, skills, various kinds of power, etc.--but what they get are inheritances and new selves, and what they must do is give in turn lest their "acquisitions" never take shape,

become misshapen, or whither. For if I cease the gifting, our relationship becomes static, it rests on its laurels: the people involved stop growing, learning slows. If you and I are in an exchange relationship wherein you give me an amount equal to what you receive, then our relationship can (and usually does) end. We have no further need of each other, unless and until I need your services/products again. In a gifting relationship what I give you creates a need in you to respond, to change, to grow, and to take seriously our relationship as an ongoing one. True teachers remain parts of the beings of their students long after the term ends, and students continuously give new life and light to teachers. Teachers know that they have given a gift worth giving when students return years later and say they were transformed by what occurred in their classroom relationships.

Perhaps one way of clarifying how gifting differs from economic exchange is to examine what parents are doing when they invest in a college education for their children. In what is usually the most expensive as well as capstone purchase most parents ever make for their children, few parents would say it is simply like buying their child a new coat only on a grander scale. Most, in fact, probably would be terribly disappointed if **all** their children got was a "product" (even a plum job). People sense that college is a gift, a bequeath of culture wherein their child takes major strides in becoming a person. As with all gifting, the risks are great because the outcomes are totally unpredictable. And at up to $30,000 per year it is small wonder that more and more people are emphasizing the secondary, instrumental, and measurable goals--knowledge and skills acquisition, and job preparation.

An odd and frustrating feature of teaching, as compared to the work most people do, is that we cannot anticipate what the results of our efforts will be. I would suggest that this frustration is a major motivation in teachers and administrators becoming so wedded to grades or to other "objective" results--they give us a sense of accomplishment, something tangible to give us mooring. The selves we are helping form, however, are not particularly measurable objects, and just what our impact will be is mainly unpredictable. We are stuck with being frustrated.

I believe the gifting metaphor for education is inadequate and problematic in a number of ways, and therefore it needs to be supplemented with or supplanted by other metaphors; nevertheless this alternative economic trope can serve a valuable function by helping to highlight some of the temptations of power involved in teaching and learning. Because teaching as gift giving creates an imbalance, one can see the seduction, on the one hand, for teachers to misuse their powers, and for students, on the other, to be lured into various unfruitful responses out of resentment.

Properly understood, the gifting metaphor can help us resist these seductions. While teachers and learners, like gift givers and receivers, are not equal (which is what the consumer trope seeks), what must occur if these dangerous shoals are to be avoided, is to give and receive **in the right ways**. Gifting, as evidenced by potlatches gone awry, can become a game of power over; but done well, they are more like a dance of joy, a ritual of celebration and thankfulness.

A second insight of the gifting metaphor, properly understood, is that often the gifted in turn gives to the gift giver. Teachers who do not realize what

comes back around are insensitive to the many gifts students can and do often "return": a reminder of one's own journey, a fresh question, a new story, the joy of learning a new idea, a life changed for the better. Gifting may not be an equal exchange, but it is an exchange nevertheless.

Another danger of the metaphor of education as gifting is that teaching can be seen as transmission, a transference of knowledge from one person to another. Furthermore, by highlighting the gift, one again can overlook the centrality of the self. Again, while these are not necessarily implications of the gifting metaphor properly understood, they indicate further weaknesses with this image of education. On the other hand, this trope highlights **receiving** or the attitude of the learner. Many people have written about the difficulties, in western culture, and especially in America, with receiving gifts: our individualist tradition makes it difficult for many of us to allow others to give us anything (we don't want to depend on others, to be beholden). Without an openness (vulnerability...which is anathema to the independence view of freedom) to learning something from someone that truly will make a difference, education is impossible. Thus the gifting metaphor helps us see that the attitude of the learner is as crucial as the attitude of the teacher if true gifting is to occur.

The near ubiquity of boredom among students throughout our educational system indicates the lack of passion (of ecstasy, as bell hooks says[9]), of eros, in American education. Gifting is exciting, both for the giver and for the receiver. If education is seen as a kind of gifting, then a major feature of teaching and learning should be the excitement that drives boredom away.

Clearly this metaphor carries much meaning that can help us re-imagine education. While I have shown some possible implications, both helpful and

problematic, of education as gifting, I will leave much of the work to the reader. As a final word, I hope that this alternative economic image of education helps us focus on the dynamics, the uncertainties, and most importantly the relationships of selves involved in teaching and learning. Education is a powerful venue in the lives of selves, and selves are a major source of mystery and wonder, usually seen as the domain of religion (souls). Thus perhaps a final value of the gifting metaphor for education is to suggest that the most appropriate responses to learning, by both teacher and student, are best thought of in religious terms: awe and thankfulness. The possibilities for misuse and misunderstanding in education are parallel to those in religion, but so are the possibilities for real transformation. As practitioners of religion know, the fact that something is religious or spiritual does not mean it is ethereal or immaterial: to see the heart of education as a religious matter does not mean the practices of education do not involve rolled up sleeves or tears and laughter; rather, it means that we should be ever mindful of the gift education is.

Endnotes

[1]For an excellent discussion of some good reasons for fearing TQM and its cognates as applied in education, see Mike Parker and Jane Slaughter, "Beware! TQM Is Coming to Your Campus." *The NEA Higher Education Journal* 5, Vol. X, No. 1, Spring, 1994. Also see Katherine S. Mangan, "TQM: Colleges Embrace the Concept of 'Total Quality Management.'" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. (12 Aug. 1992):A25-26.

[2]The discussion of power in this part of the paper is drawn, in large measure, from an article by Karen J. Warren, "Toward an Ecofeminist Peace Politics." In *Ecological Feminism*, New York: Routledge, 1994. She in turn borrows much of her analysis of power from R.M. Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation*, New York: Basic Books, 1974.

[3]Recent writers and books in this tradition include: Michael Apple, *Education and Power* (1982), *Cultural and Economic Reproduction in Education* (1982), *Ideology and Practice in Schooling* (1987), and *The Politics of the Textbook* (1992); Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux, *Education Still Under Siege* (1993, 2nd Edition); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1973), *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1977), and *The Politics of Education* (1985); Henry Giroux, *Teachers as Intellectuals* (1988), *Popular Culture, Schooling and Everyday Life* (1989), *Postmodern Education* (with Stanley Aronowitz, 1991),

and *Living Dangerously: Multiculturalism and the Politics of Difference* (1993); and Ira Shor, *Empowering Education* (1993), and *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*(1992).

[4]Arendt, Hannah, *The Human Condition*.

[5]Aristotle talks of the "cooperative arts" of agriculture, medicine, and education. In such activities one works with rather than controlling, and one can only have and exercise power in cooperation with the patient, plant/animal, or learner. (My thanks to John Walsh of Pueblo Community College for this connection with Aristotle.)

[6]Moore, Thomas, *Care of the Soul*, San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992, and *Soul Mates*, HarperCollins, 1994.

[7]For recent work in the philosophy of self and modern identities see especially Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989), and *Human Agency and Language* (1985); Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self* (1973), and *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985); Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self* (1992); Graham Parkes, *Composing the Soul: Reaches of Nietzsche's Psychology* (1994); Owen Flannagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality* (1993); LeRoy Rouner, ed, *Selves, People, and Persons* (1994); and John Caputo, *Against Ethics* (1993).

[8]Hyde, Lewis, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (1983). See also Calvin Martin, *Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relations and the Fur Trade* (1989) and many of Wendell Berry's writings such as *Home Economics* (1993). Much of the literature on a feminine ethic coming from Carol Gilligan and her followers articulates features of the point of view I am trying to describe

here: e.g., Nel Noddings, *Caring* (1984), and Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking* (1989).

[9]hooks, bell, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge, 1994. See especially Ch. 13, "Eros, Eroticism, and the Pedagogical Process," and Ch. 14, "Ecstasy: Teaching and Learning Without Limits."